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<cn>Chapter 18

<ct>Feminist Theory

<au>Elaine Graham

<a> Late again, Cinderella

<p>Half a century ago, Valerie Saiving published an article that is widely credited as the first example of academic feminist theological writing. In “The Human Situation: A Feminine View” (19792 [1960]), Saiving argued that the Christian doctrine of sin, grounded in supposedly universal human experience, actually rested on gender bias. Protestant orthodoxy held that the generic human condition was one of pride, of denying one’s dependence on the love and grace of God, and that the corresponding virtue was one of self-denial. Yet Saiving suggested that this took no consideration of the differential socializsation of females, whose sin is not a surfeit of pride, but one of self-abnegation. To preach a doctrine of self-sacrifice to women is to exacerbate the distortion in their character imposed by male domination. Rather, virtue for women in such a situation is to cultivate positive self-esteem as an antidote to the demoralizsing effects of androcentric models of selfhood.

Since then, feminist theology has blossomed into a global and ecumenical movement. Its impact on the churches and academic theology has been considerable, not least because its concerns transcend the boundaries between academy, church, and society. The scope of feminist theological debate encompasses a diversity of disciplines and perspectives, and has fuelled critical attention to matters as various as ministry and ordination, language, bBiblical hermeneutics, and ethics. Its political significance has been to alert churches and theology to the historical exclusion of women from the tradition, but and also to the centrality of gender to the activities of ministry, the language of religious experience and theological discourse, and the importance of religious symbolism in shaping predominant representations of gender in Western culture (Ruether 2010).

Saiving’s critique of the doctrines of sin and salvation and of the partial nature of theories of virtue has profoundly practical implications. It exposes not only the bias of systems of Christian thought, but makes its impact on the models of vocation and Christian virtue deemed normative and exemplary for women, as later generations of feminist writers were to point out. Despite a proliferation of literature in fields such as feminist ethics, bBiblical studies, systematic and philosophical theology, which reflected the emergence of feminist academic

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studies by the late 1960s and 1970s, it was not until the early 1990s that a significant body of material in practical theology and pastoral studies began to emerge (Glaz and Moessner 1991; Doehring 1992; Ramsay 1992; Graham and Halsey 1993).

Such tardiness in connecting "theory" and "practice"is hard to understand. After all, it is in the field of pastoral care and the exercise of ministry that we apprehend most acutely what Bonnie Miller-McLemore has recently termed "the slippery fault line between the rhetoric of creation in God's image and the complicated reality of its embodiment" (2009: 48). Practical theology may still have an image in many quarters as the ""~~"~~Cinderella subject" ~~"~~of the theological sciences (Bennett 2007: 73); but why, given all the obvious affinities with their sister scholars, were feminist practical theologians so slow to come to the ball?

In my overview of feminist practical theology published at the end of the 1990s, I characteriz~~s~~ed its development as roughly compatible with the evolution of second-wave feminism in the West, and mirroring similar moments within feminist and womanist ethics, systematic theology and biblical s~~S~~tudies (Graham~~,~~ 1999). I spoke of the first phase of practical theology as one of *protest* against the invisibility of women, followed by a task of *resistance* to the objectification and exclusion of women – as agents, as theological authorities, as authentic sources of experience – and of reconstructing tradition and practice in pursuit of a third goal, that of the *transformation* of c~~C~~hurch and society (Graham~~,~~ 1999). At around the same time, from the United States, Bonnie Miller-McLemore was outlining a similar structure for feminist pastoral and practical theology: of *critique*, *advocacy*, and *reconstruction* (1999: 80). However, these movements might also be framed in more embodied and sensoryu~~al~~ terms: of listening and seeing~~,~~~~:~~of speaking~~,~~~~:~~ and of acting. All such metaphors reflect attempts to capture the movement from silence into speech so irresistible within feminist and womanist theory, as well as the vital process of realiz~~s~~ing one's own agency – "to join in the cultural activity of defining reality" (Miller-McLemore 1999: 79).

In this chapter, therefore, I will trace the ways in which the perennial feminist themes of protest, affirmation, and new creation have taken root in pastoral and practical theological scholarship. Yet Saiving's main preoccupation, of finding a basis in *doctrine* for the *practice* of affirming women's full subjectivity, provides a continuous dialectic. If the mismatch between prescriptive teaching and the reality of women's actual existence served as the original "problem with no name" that fuelled twentieth-century feminist activism and scholarship, then some of the most creative new scholarship in feminist practical theology is returning to the "living human web" (Miller-McLemore 1996) of women's experience as the place in which, as Saiving insisted, "doctrinal dramas be tested in the concrete lives of women" (Bennett 2002: 18).

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<a>Breaking the Silence

<p>Valerie Saiving's characterization of what she termed the "feminine" experience may appear to us now, half a century later, as dangerously essentializing and derogatory. Classical psychoanalysis and early anthropology forms the basis of her critique of women's condition under patriarchy, but to postfeminist ears her language may reflect a rather too ahistorical and deterministic account. Furthermore, her characterizsation of typical female traits hardly conveys a sense of sisterly solidarity:

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…the specifically feminine forms of sin…have a quality which can never be encompassed by such terms as "pride" and "will-to-power." They are rather suggested by such items as triviality, distractibility, and diffuseness; lack of an organizing center or focus; dependence on others for one's own self-definition; tolerance at the expense of standards of excellence; inability to respect the boundaries of privacy; sentimentality, gossipy sociability, and mistrust of reason – in short, *underdevelopment or negation of the self*. (Saiving, 19792: 37.; my emphasis mine)

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Two comments are relevant at this point. First, Saiving may be observing the tendency of women to display immature and trivial behavior, but she understands these to be aspects of cultural expectations she deplores as the outworking of a patriarchal society. Second, Saiving was not alone in denouncing the way in which women were required to collude in their own mediocrity in order to conform to socially prescribed norms of "femininity." From the eighteenth-century feminist Mary Wollstonecraft, who decried the conventions of girls' feebleness of mind and body, to the pioneering feminist writer Simone de Beauvoir, a strong strand of feminist theory has despaired at the failure of women to achieve their full potential as rational beings. For de Beauvoir, woman is the "eternal child," infantilized and silenced by the expectations of a male-dominated world that renders her dependent on the will of others, incapable of being or becoming a free agent.The root of women's subordination derives from their status as failed subjects: "But after all, seeing clearly is not her business: she was taught to accept masculine authority; she thus forgoes criticising, examining and judging for herself" (de Beauvoir 2009 [1949]: 655). Memorably, of course, de Beauvoir also argued, "One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman" (293). Nothing about the arrangements and imbalances between women and men is written into nature. Thus, in *The Second Sex* (1949) de Beauvoir set out to expose the cultural myths and ideals that shape expectations of what "true" femininity should be, and to expose them as mere artifice. If woman is incapable of

transcending the prosaic preoccupations of sensuality and triviality – “she gives importance to little things because she lacks access to big ones” (2009: 659) – then this is because she is given little opportunity to do so. The male-dominated world thus appears a mystery into which she cannot enter as an equal, much less hope to bend to her will or act as a knowing, rational subject within it. She lives vicariously (671) rather than seizing her own personhood and destiny; “her wings are cut and then she is blamed for not knowing how to fly” (660). In such exasperation with women’s internalization of patriarchy’s script, we see these early feminists’ impatience to progress beyond critique and resistance to transformation, in order to imagine how women might live lives characterized by moral courage and self-actualization rather than passivity.

Part of the protest that fuelled second-wave feminism in the West after the 1960s was therefore against the silencing and objectification of women: their confinement into vessels of male gratification or as the projections of male fantasy. Betty Friedan, ~~A~~a leading figure in the US women’s movement, produced a ~~Betty Friedan’s~~ trenchant analysis of the “problem with no name”. ~~-~~which perfectly distilled the experience of ~~postwar~~ many middle-class women in the years immediately following World War II. H~~who, h~~aving tasted the fruits of educational privilege and economic freedom ~~in the years immediately following the 1939-45~~~~World W~~~~war II~~, they found their horizons reduced to loneliness and *ennui* in the shape of suburban motherhood and domesticity.

As these influences found their way into schools of divinity, feminist theological and biblical critics followed suit, by exposing the doctrines of sin, pride, or self-denial that offered religious sanction for the subordination of women. If secular feminist theory refuted the “naturalism” or divinely ~~-~~ordained status of women’s second-class status, then~~so~~ theologians, philosophers, and biblical scholars also turned their attention to the deconstruction of the “God-given” nature of gender inequality, not least its roots in biblical tradition and doctrine (Fiorenza 1984; Ruether 2010).

<a>From “Incredibility” to “Credibility”

<p>In speaking of the impact of feminist theory on the study of religion, Miller-McLemore echoes the early critiques of Saiving, de Beauvoir, and others. The priority has been to protest against a system which, materially and symbolically, has infantilized and disenfranchised women:

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Feminist and womanist thought has exposed the misogyny embedded in traditions and institutions that have characterized women as emotionally juvenile, morally and intellectually inferior, and spiritually evil. It has interrogated the very categories and customs that define religion. (Miller-McLemore 1999: 78)

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<p>British practical theologian Zoë Bennett argues that the objectification of women to the products of patriarchal fantasies is a form of violence, regardless of whether physical force is involved. In de Beauvoir's terms, it is an interruption to women's right to live as rational creatures,; a denial of their full humanity, through their relegation to subordinate roles and positions. Even the elevation of women to guardians of virtue or keepers of complementary characteristics to men represents an inhibition of their potential to grow into full subjectivity independent of external prescription.

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The expression "conspiracy of silence" is normally used to indicate the cover-up of a specific issue or abuse. It seems to me an appropriate expression for the whole phenomenon of the refusal to name women's problems…, for the *incredibility* of women when they do attempt to tell their stories…and for the way in which women's analysis of society as patriarchal, and their commitment to change it, is so often cast as "strident,"extremist and marginal. (Bennett 2002: 39; emphasis mine)

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<p>In highlighting the move from incredibility to credibility, Bennett is referring specifically to Dutch pastoral theologian Riet Bons-Storm's groundbreaking work in books such as *The Incredible Woman* (1996). Bons-Storm clearly exemplifies the imperative to emancipate women from the prescriptive teachings and practices of patriarchal tradition into new paths of self-actualization.

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Like de Beauvoir, Bons-Storm sees women's captivity in the "narrow space" (1996: 134) of prescribed gender roles. Outside of the narrow space "they enter the vast territory of shame and guilt feelings, mixed with rebellious feelings of an emerging and developing subject quality" (135). They dimly perceive an alternative, more genuine identity for themselves, but they lack a language or conceptual framework through which they might imagine it. They are lost in a "terrible silence" (31), but Bons-Storm regards the task of feminist pastoral care as one of enabling women to learn the necessary vocabulary of self-esteem by which they can articulate the complexities and realities of their lives free from external expectations. They must gain more expansive ways of speaking in order to find larger spaces in which to live. This entails

moving from “unstory” (58) – the inability to name the “problem” with no name – into the world of new “counternarratives” (~~p.~~111) that tell of self-affirmation and full subjectivity.

Feminist theology has also challenged the invisibility of women in many areas of Christian pastoral practice, such as religious education, ministry, and liturgy. Again, the argument has been that many of the criteria for effective ministry have operated according to male, and clerical, norms. As women’s perspectives were integrated into theory and translated into practice, they challenged prevailing patriarchal standards of selfhood, virtue, and vocation, and demonstrated how women's aspirations and experiences may differ (Greider ~~Johnson and Leslie,~~et al. 1999: 29–32). Those writing during the 1990s offered new renditions of care-giving and spiritual formation that attempted to move beyond exclusive or prescriptive models, towards more inclusive patterns of being and becoming. Given the novelty of working from a gynocentric recognition of women’s pastoral needs (Graham~~,~~ 1990), many writers found themselves breaking the silence of taboo subjects such as violence and abuse (Fortune 1983), infertility (Walton 1998), mental illness (Neuger 1993) and mothering (Miller-McLemore 1994). Gill-Austern (1996) echoed Saiving’s original critique in examining how orthodoxies of love as self-denial acted to constrain and distort women’s sense of vocation and spirituality.

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<a>Finding a (Different) Voice: Articulating Resistance and Its Alternatives

<p>Yet if breaking the silence is an important step in addressing women’s exclusion, finding the right words with which to articulate their experience is equally challenging. As Bennett remarks, “Women are frequently required not only to justify their stories in a male-dominated institution, but also to express them in the language and thought-forms of male-dominated philosophical, psychological and religious traditions” (2002: 40)

How do formerly silenced communities find their way into speech if the predominant culture has rendered their lives “unspeakable” – or in Bons-Storm’s terms “incredible”? The halting, stumbling passage from silence into speech is not smooth or direct; but more recent practical and pastoral theology from a feminist perspective has come to focus more and more on such processes, both as personal pilgrimages of spiritual or therapeutic discovery and as journeys toward a deeper form of knowledge about the world – a new validation of what it means to experience, to know, and to be in the world.

An early focus was to give visibility to the experience of women in ministry, often as an accompaniment to campaigns for ordination or for other rights. But it soon became more than lobbying for women’s inclusion in existing ecclesial structures, and ventured into considering how women’s presence and leadership might forge new ways of being church, or foster

innovative models of mission in a variety of human contexts (Greider~~, Johnson and Leslie~~ et al.~~,~~ 1999: 45–47). Some of this took place at the margins of traditional patterns of pastoral care, so that women's ministry was seen as entering new spaces and pioneering new styles of care, liturgy, or spiritual formation (Glaz and ~~Stevenson~~ Moessner, 1991; Ramsay 1992; Graham and Halsey 1993; Wootton 2000). Yet of course, this may not fit well within the established paradigms of academic discourse, thereby exacerbating the marginal status and low impact of practical theology as a discipline.

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<a>"Writing for Our Lives": The Return to Lived Experience

<p>We cannot escape, therefore, from the dilemma already identified for feminist practical theology, and perhaps the discipline as a whole: its often ambivalent place in an academic system that values the elucidation of high theory over the interrogation of lived experience. Such a tension was certainly evident in the texts that marked the breakthrough and consolidation of feminist pastoral and practical theology 20 years ago (Ackermann and Bons-Storm 1998; Graham 1999; Miller-McLemore 1999). Yet much of the scholarship in the field since then has placed the troubling category of "women's experience" and the problematic of studying lived experience at the center of its concerns. It has taken to heart the dilemma articulated by Miller-McLemore, of "honoring in theoretical discussions the idiosyncrasies of ordinary lived experience – quotidian life" of women (1999: 70), and of holding the immediacy of praxis and narrative in creative tension with a more systematized, analytical mode. Such work has embraced the complexity of standpoint, context, and phenomenology in accounting for women's reality – reflecting much of the mood of wider feminist theory at the beginning of the twenty-first century – and crafted versions of feminist practical theology that focus explicitly on ways in which women actually inhabit lives of faith and develop new patterns of spirituality, religious language, practices of ministry, and sacramental community. Whilst such work does represent a new epistemological and methodological seriousness, however, there is a strong continuity of attention to the "living human document" and "living human web" (Miller-McLemore 1996) that has always been at the heart of practical theology. Yet it goes further, to illustrate very directly how "living webs of congregational and social practices" (Miller-McLemore 1999: 91) might be wellsprings of new ways of knowing and acting within feminist and gynocentric perspectives.

As we have seen, the category of "women's experience" has been of revolutionary and untold value for feminist theory and politics (Ruether 2010). Yet it almost goes without saying that at the instant of its declamation comes an apprehension of its limitations: Which

women? Under what circumstances? How is it expressed? What are the origins of such differential experience? As feminist theory grew in significance and became more diverse, so too ~~it~~ was it recognized that whatever its strategic significance, the currency of such an appeal to a trans-cultural, generic concept was tainted by the risk of its perpetuation of the "original sin" of universali~~z~~zing diverse and pluralistic lives. As Kwok ~~(2005)~~Pui L~~l~~an argues, it is a form of colonialism:

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The appeal to universal human experience and the inability to respect diverse cultures are expressions of a colonizing motive: the incorporation of the Other into one's own culture or perspective. (~~Pui lan,~~Kwok 2005: 56)

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If women labored under the stigma of being the 'O~~o~~ther' to androcentric projections of reality – as de Beauvoir's and Saiving''s breakthrough realizations had claimed – then feminist theory needed to elaborate how to speak about women's lived experiences in ways that disclosed their epistemological and phenomenological complexity without losing political and analytical coherence. The matrices of race, class, (dis)~~/~~ability, education, religion, and sexual orientation were vital tools in understanding the complex dynamics of global and cross-cultural patterns of power and difference. But no matter how unsatisfactory the category, "women's experience" nevertheless retained a strategic utility, not least in exposing and opposing the continued failure to acknowledge women as fully human subjects.

It is that sensibility, I believe, that has given rise in more recent feminist practical theology to studies of the actualities of lived experience and to the practices of faith by which women exercise agency. Such work shows how the traditional frameworks of liturgy and ritual, spiritual direction, and development and education for ministry are being deployed to claim women's experiences as worthy of being named as God-given, and thus to move from invisibility into visibility. These emergent studies attend to the processes and methods by which women are creating new subjectivities and perspectives that ~~neither~~ represent neither the shadow ~~o~~O~~O~~thers of male projection nor the adoption of surrogate masculinity. They reflect "~~…~~ the importance of attending to real women in the real world, to a realistic assessment of sin and salvation, of evil and goodness as they are made manifest in women's actual lives, not to some idealized or demonized projections." (Bennett 2002: 97)

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Much of this work has strong affinities with feminist epistemologies and forms of action research. Mary Fulkerson's (1994) early work on communities of conservative Protestant women exposed the problems of projecting a particular feminist account of

women's experience without significantly paying attention to the ambiguities of such worlds, whilst still being able to account for the places in which, however precariously, autonomous and self-affirming voices were in evidence. Subsequently, Fulkerson (2007a) has embraced the sensibilities of practical theological method more explicitly ~~(Fulkerson, 2007a)~~, and her ethnographic congregational study of the Good Samaritan Church serves as a model of how the vantage ~~-~~point of the (w~~W~~hite, feminist, academic) researcher interacts with the "worldliness" of that community – its embeddedness in a complex web of meanings and lived realities:

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By…a "worldly" theology, of course I do not mean an empirical, "objective" analysis of this community. Even anthropologists have long given up this ideal. Instead I propose an inquiry for a theological frame that will be adequate to the full-bodied reality that is Good Samaritan, one capable of displaying its ambiguity, its implication in the banal, opaque realities of ordinary existence, even as it allows for testimony to God's redemptive reality. I envision a theology that thematizes the complex and dense subject matter of contemporary *situation*. Attention to the worldly, situational character of Christian faith directs me to the task of practical theology. (Fulkerson 2007b: 7)

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An early leader in feminist practical theology, Denise Ackermann (1998) offers examples of what it means to read the Bible in a similarly "worldly" situation: through the eyes of women in South Africa, in a context of the AIDS epidemic and continued economic polarization ~~(Ackermann 1998)~~. She illustrates how text and context fuse powerfully into new hermeneutical methods and understandings that inform the pastoral and political interventions of the Christian churches.

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British practical theologian Jan Berry's study of women members of a feminist ritual group makes similar appeal to trends in recent feminist epistemology, arguing that her adoption of ethnographic methods provides the best means of negotiating the tension between bringing the lives of "o~~"O~~thers" to wider attention whilst being aware of the dangers of coloniz~~s~~ing or objectifying such accounts all over again~~.~~ (Berry 2009: 35–62). Such research privileges the telling of women's stories and the observation of the "thickness" of their lives and activities (~~Berry, 2009:~~ 41). Berry was also concerned that in constructing an account of occasions in which women brought intimate and personal issues into the forum of liturgy and ritual, she risked transgressing the boundaries between "private" and "public." Yet if a cornerstone of feminist theory and practice has been that "the personal is political," then one of her objectives

must also be to make visible aspects of women's lives – academic success, divorce, unemployment, hysterectomy – that seldom figure in the church's public worship or theology. All she can do is attempt a portrait of these lives; but despite the risks of reducing the richness of lived experience, it is a project entirely in keeping with the sensibilities of feminist theory and practice:

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In an aim that is consistent with liberation theology's bias to the poor, I want to tell stories that make a difference to women, that if possible are empowering and liberating, and at the very least do not cause harm, shame or even embarrassment to the women who have participated in my research…I write in the belief – or hope – that anything which makes visible the realities of women's lives in a patriarchal church and society, and which strengthens the awareness of women's creativity, must contribute to empowering and liberating them. (Berry 2009: 61)

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Similarly, British religious education scholar Nicola Slee's (2004) study of women's faith development adopts feminist research methods that are explicitly committed to women's empowerment and to the articulation of experiences traditionally discounted by the "malestream." This offers significant challenges in terms of representation, not least of the researcher's own reflexivity, but the benefits come in the bringing to birth of stories and insights hitherto hidden, and the possibilities of these being integrated into conventional models of faith development and Christian nurture.

Such work focuses intentionally on actual pastoral, liturgical, and spiritual practices as the crucible in which new kinds of practical theology are being forged. This final strand, therefore, takes forward one of the areas identified by US pastoral theologians Kathleen Greider, Gloria Johnson, and Kristen Leslie in their overview of feminist pastoral and practical theology: the study of women's "soulfulness," or "the intersections of spirituality, religious experience, and theology" (1999: 40). This is about the search of human souls for the divine, and a quest for an explicitly theological and devotional grounding to the becoming of women as full subjects. It may span areas such as spiritual direction and formation, religious experience, ethics and the life cycle – but at root, we might characterize this as how women encounter and name the sSacred, how communities of faith are formed, how the journey of faith is nurtured. In their attention to the phenomenology of lived experience, therefore, Fulkerson, Ackermann, Berry, Slee, and others affirm the value of women's practices of faith in actually forging "a community of caregivers with whom to share the responsibilities of care, the joys of healing, and the

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creation together of environments for soulful care" (Greider, Johnson and Leslie et al., 1999: 47).

The British feminist Sheila Rowbotham observes that contemporary women still face the "conundrum" articulated by Simone de Beauvoir in *The Second Sex*: of how to see beyond the pervasiveness of enforced gender differences towards a more equitable and mutually liberating arrangement between women and men. That is in many respects a work in progress, then as now; but Rowbotham concludes that de Beauvoir's project of "exploration, resistance and creation" (Rowbotham, 2009: xviii) remains as relevant as ever. The strategy of "disidentification" (Braidotti 2008: 18) from hegemonic and oppressive mind-sets and practices is a first step towards the realization of new visions. Yet "the quest for new creative alternatives and sustainable futures" is equally arduous, as one of gathering and assembling "fragments" of the old in the service of new paradigms (Braidotti, 2008: 19).

As I have demonstrated in this chapter, similar dynamics of diagnosis, critique, and reconstruction form a recurrent thread in many feminist analyses, including those that have characterized work in feminist practical theology. Writing in this field places emphasis on the lived experience of women free from patriarchal myth-making and objectification, whilst being concerned to move beyond simplistic evocation of "women's experience" to forge a new dynamic of a practical theology that examines the complexities of women's existence, and which summons and articulates the theological resources for the journey from invisibility to visibility. Its methodology is one of listening to and attempting to interpret the "social ecology" (Greider, Johnson and Leslie et al., 1999: 46) of women's spiritual relationships and practices that create their lived contexts of care and ministry. Such an insistence on the primacy of lived experience is not a surrender to anti-intellectualism – in fact, it requires a high degree of methodological sophistication of knowing and hearing and a preparedness to live with the "messiness" of existence (Ward 2004). It is, however, but a continuation of the feminist aspiration to resist universalizing appeals to the human condition and of finding more authentic ways of hearing, speaking, and acting. It is an assurance to feminist pastoral and practical theologians "that it is appropriate…to start from life experience and to move to a theorizing of that experience and to a critique of existing theory, that feminist pastoral theology will involve a critique of existing Christian beliefs and doctrines, and finally that it is the aim of feminist pastoral theology to renew and transform belief and practice" (Bennett, 2002: 138).

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